

INTRODUCING YOUNG STUDENTS TO THE CONSTITUTION

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Grade levels: 1-3

Introduction: United States Constitution is not a subject that should just be reserved for students above the sixth grade. By the time many students start kindergarten, they have been in group situations where there were rules about standing in line, taking turns and sharing materials. They know there are consequences for not following rules and rewards for good behavior. Teachers should tell their students that adults also have rules that are called laws and that the United States Constitution is the law everyone in the United States follows. This lesson introduces students to the idea that the Constitution gives citizens certain rights in particular the rights in the First Amendment.

Materials needed: A copy of the United States Constitution, art materials, a large circle of paper or poster board cut into five equal pie slices.

Steps and procedures:

1. Define “right.” Through class discussion, the students may arrive at a simple definition like, “A right is something you have that no one can take away from you.”
2. Ask students to imagine that they have some wonderful news they want to share with their classmates. What are some ways they can do this? (Tell it in person, write it down, make a tape recording, make a video, send an e-mail, etc.). Explain to the student these are all forms of expression and that in the United States it is everyone’s right to be able to express him or herself.
3. Tell the students that in this lesson, they are going to explore where rights come from. Ask them to list rights they have in their classroom. These might include right to use learning centers, right to play with a classroom pet, right to sharpen a pencil, right to use the classroom library or the right to use the restroom. Where do these rights come from? The students and the teacher agreed them upon or perhaps the teacher gave the students these rights.
4. Tell the students that the rights people in the United States have came about in a similar way. Show the students a copy of the Constitution. Explain that it is a document about who can be the president and how laws are made. When the people saw the first copy of the Constitution, they did not like it because it did not say what rights all people have in this country. So the writers made some changes.
5. Tell the students that the first change made was the First Amendment and that it contains many rights. Tell the students you are going to read a story about the First Amendment and that they should raise their hands every time they hear about a right:

Hello, I am the First Amendment. An amendment is a change so my name means the “first change.” I was the first change made in the Constitution. Many people call me Number One.

I was created in 1789. James Madison, who later became president and who is called the Father of the Constitution, said I should become part of the Constitution. He said the people of the United States would like the Constitution better if the ideas in me were in it.

One of those ideas was the idea that people should be able to go to any church, synagogue, temple or mosque. Or they should be able to decide not to go to church at all. The government should not be able to stop them. That’s called freedom of religion.

My favorite big idea is freedom of speech. I love to talk. And I have good ideas, just like you do, that I think people should hear.

Do your parents read the newspaper or watch the news on television? Do like to read a good book or have your parents or teacher read one to you? Because of me, newspaper writers, television broadcasters and authors can write what they want. This is called freedom of the press. A press is a machine for printing newspapers.

Do you like to get together with your friends and family? Do you belong to clubs? I protect your right to get together with other people. This called freedom of assembly.

Do you ever hear people complaining about the government? Maybe you have heard people they don't like certain laws or certain taxes. I can help people tell the government what they don't like. I give people the right to tell the government what is wrong and ask for a change.

I am pretty old—200 on December 15, 1791, so now I am ____old. But I still feel very young and you can help me stay strong by being a good citizen.

6. Divide the group into five groups. Give each group one of the pie slices cut from the circle. Assign a particular freedom to each group, telling them to draw an illustration or find a picture from a magazine about it. When all the groups are finished, assemble the wheel and make it the classroom “Freedom Wheel.”